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ABSTRACT

Three social theories (status-competition theory, functionalism, and legitimation theory) are considered as explanations of a growing vocationalism in higher education. Vocationalism is used to refer to an increasing interest among undergraduate students in pursuing studies that lead directly to occupational competence. Status-competition theory is thought to plausibly explain the growth of higher education and the status it imparts, but it does not explain the growth of vocationalism in higher education. It is claimed that a version of functionalism proposed by Talcott Parsons and Gerald M. Platt does not make a simple connection between occupational performance and educational preparation. According to this version of functionalism, the growth of higher education is not to be explained by the economic benefits that come from knowledge, and yet this theory explains the growing interest in occupationally relevant knowledge by the increased professionalization of occupational roles. The basic claim of legitimation theory is that the schools alter the social structure itself. Education is thought to expand the sources of cultural authority and in so doing creates new sets of specialized social positions. The second effect of education on social structure is that educational institutions designate the persons who are qualified to act as experts. New knowledge makes possible new expertise and new expertise expands the realm of professional practice. In this way educational institutions are thought to be in a position to create new professions. (SW)

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VOCATIONALISM IN HIGHER EDUCATION: EXPLANATIONS FROM SOCIAL THEORY

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Differential Growth in Bachelor's Degrees Conferred

When measured by bachelor's degrees conferred, the growth pattern of higher education in the 1970's was uneven in that some fields of study flourished and others languished. Between the academic years of 1970-71 and 1976-77 the number of bachelor's degrees awarded by institutions of higher education in the United States increased by 9.5 percent. (Table 1) However this general rate of growth was greatly exceeded by some disciplines and not to be found in others. In Computer and Information Sciences the bachelor degrees awarded during this period increased by 168 percent; in the Health Professions, 127 percent; in Public Affairs and Services, 294 percent. However the number of bachelor's degrees awarded in Letters declined 35 percent; in Social Sciences, 24 percent; in Foreign Languages, 30 percent. These data suggest a growing vocationalism in higher education, i.e. an increasing interest among undergraduate studetns in pursuing those studies that lead directly to occupational competence.

Admittedly, this claim of a growing vocationalism in higher education cannot be sustained without qualification. Throughout its history higher education has certified students as fitting candidates for select occupational positions, and in that sense higher education has always been involved in vocational preparation. But an educational program can be vocationally relevant in at least two ways. First, mastery of a particular subject can be made a pre-requisite for entry into an occupation. Thus at certain periods in British

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history a knowledge of the classics was necessary to pass the civil service examinations. Second, through mastery of a subject a person might acquire knowledge and skill which are necessary for occupational competence. Thus a knowledge of nursing procedures is a necessary condition for effective performance as a nurse, and these procedures can be studied. What seems to have occurred in the 70's is a growth of interest among students in those fields of study that are vocationally relevant in this second sense, namely they provide knowledge and skill which are necessary for successful occupational performance. Thus the growth of vocationalism that occurred in higher education during the 70's was not that which derives from the general relevance of a bachelor's degree to securing an occupation of high status, but rather from an increased interest in the specific preparation for occupational performance found in some fields of study.

However not every field of study directly related to occupational competence benefited from an increased interest. The number of bachelor's degrees awarded in education fell more than 18 percent; in library science, 35 percent; in engineering, one percent. Apparently employment opportunities within occupations affected the selection of degree programs. This does not challenge the claim of a growth in vocationalism. Just the opposite: the decline of degrees awarded in these fields of study corresponds to the diminished demand for personnel in the related occupations, giving further evidence of the vocational interest that governs a student's choice of degree program.

Still it must be admitted that the increase of degrees in the Fine and Applied Arts of more than 37 percent indicates that the growth of vocationalism in higher education was not without exception. Even when this field of study is broken down into its sub-parts (Table 2) the increased interest

does not appear limited to those studies connected with occupational performance. For example, degrees awarded for general studies in the fine arts increased 36 percent; in music as part of a liberal arts program, 34 percent. Whatever the explanation for the vitality of this field, the expansion of degrees conferred for study in this area stands in marked contrast to the decline of bachelor's degrees in disciplines central to the humanities: general studies in English, -44 percent; English literature, -56 percent; history, -43 percent; philosophy, -23 percent. (Table 3) The claim of a growth of vocationalism in higher education must indeed be qualified by the expanded interest in the fine and applied arts, but nonetheless the claim is warranted by the decline of degrees awarded in letters, foreign languages, and social sciences coupled with the growth of degrees conferred in fields of study oriented to performance in an occupation.

Given the growth in vocationalism in higher education, the next question to be raised is, what accounts for it. Why did the general vocational relevance of higher education become specified during the 70's to fields of study directly connected with the acquisition of occupational competence? An answer to this question will be attempted within the framework of three different social theories. One of these, functionalism, has seen considerable use by students of higher education, although it has been somewhat out of fashion recently. Another, status-competition theory, has been extensively employed during the past decade in analyses of the social effects of education, often as a replacement for functionalism. Finally, legitimation theory is a more recent arrival on the scene, and may be an advance over the other two. Whether or not any of these social theories can explain the growth of vocationalism is in part a test of their adequacy as instruments in the study of higher education. At this point, then, the search is for both an adequate explanation

of vocationalism and an adequate social theory for the study of higher education

Status-Competition Theory

At one time a functionalist social theory would have provided a fairly acceptable explanation for the growth of vocationalism. In a highly developed industrialized society occupational positions must be filled with individuals who possess specialized cognitive skills. These skills are sufficiently complex that they cannot be acquired on the job but need to be developed through formal training in a program of education. Moreover because of continual technological innovation the skill requirements for occupational performance constantly increase. As a result an increasingly larger segment of the school population allocates more and more time to the acquisition of job-specific cognitive skills.

However plausible such an account might seem, during the past ten years functional explanations of educational events have been seriously challenged. First, research on the relationship between schooling and later occupational status has undermined the basic link in the functionalist argument between cognitive development and job performance. Jencks, for example, found that college grades did not consistently predict occupational status or future earnings. (1973, p. 187) Jencks also showed that direct tests of cognitive skills did not predict occupational status when family background and educational attainment were controlled. (1973, p. 187) Taking a different approach, Ivar Berg showed that only rarely could success in job performance be predicted by success in learning what was taught in school. (1970, pp. 85-104) Studies such as these seemed to indicate that an educational credential as such rather than specific cognitive skills was the important factor in fixing a

person's occupational future.

A second research program that called into question functionalist explanations of education was that sponsored by neo-Marxist thinkers. Their contention was that functionalism presented far too sanguine a view of the contribution of educational attainment to an individual's life chances. In their view schools did not prepare the most talented individuals to work in the most demanding and important occupations. Rather the schools served to continue the already existing socio-economic divisions in society. The schools were indeed sorting devices, but only because they socialized students from different backgrounds in different ways. The fact that some students are prepared by schools for high status occupations reflects the backgrounds of the students not their talent. (Bowles and Gintis, 1976)

Because of these apparent deficiences in the functionalist account, alternative social theories have been used to explain the role of education in society. One of these, status-competition theory, focuses on the expanding interest in constantly higher levels of education. (Collins 1971, 1977) According to this theory, in a pluralistic society such as ours various status groups compete for wealth, power, and prestige, and the forum for this competition is more or less the same for everyone. An important element in the competition is the acquisition of those cultural attributes associated with high status, hence the interest in advanced levels of education. But such education is not seen as instrumental to the acquisition of occupationally specific skills; rather it is the means for acquiring the cultural characteristics associated with high status, the evidence of which is the educational credential. However the worth of these credentials is inflated as more and more persons possess them, to the point that eventually they no longer stand as guarantees that those who hold them are worthy of high status. The labor market

then adjusts and increases the educational requirements for employment. This in turn promotes an interest in even higher levels of schooling.

Status-competition theory offers a plausible explanation for the growth of higher education and its greater necessity in the lives of those who aspire to even moderately high status in our society. But this theory is not able to explain why the growth in higher education has recently been more accentuated in fields that provide occupational training. In fact the most plausible explanation for the growth of vocationalism in higher education is out of reach for status-competition theory since this theory builds on the assertion that the importance of higher education in the competition for status is not found in any occupationally specific skills acquired through education but only in the fact that one has been the recipient of advanced schooling and thereby been appropriately socialized for a choice occupation. Of course without some qualification that assertion is patently false. Certainly some baccalaureate programs in higher education provide specific cognitive skills which fit a person for particular occupational performances. The question is how much of the importance attached to a college degree is warranted by the occupational skills represented by the degree. Randall Collins, a major proponent of status-competition theory, admits that higher education can provide specific training for professional practice, but he denies that occupations in general have become professions since "most jobs do not require considerable technical knowledge on the order of that required of the engineer of the research scientist." (1971, p. 1015) Accordingly, for most jobs the content of the college degree is not important.

What can be said, then, from the viewpoint of status-competition theory about the growing interest in college degrees that prepare an individual for at least a specific category of occupational performance? Consider the

circumstance in which everyone who aspires to high status has a college degree. What is the next rung on the competitive ladder? Certainly pursuing a further degree is one possibility, but another is to intensify the quality of the first degree by making it specifically related to a particular occupation. The vocational turn then becomes a stratagem within the competition for status. But this seems far too ad hoc an adjustment in status-competition theory because now it stands on the same ground that it originally denied to functionalism.

Functionalism

The recent growth pattern in higher education appears to give a new respectability to functional explanations of the contribution made by higher education to society. Yet interestingly enough, at least the most sophisticated version of functionalism, that of Talcott Parsons, does not make a simple connection between occupational performance and educational preparation.

Recall that Parsons distinguishes four general subsystems of action: the cultural system, the social system , the personality system, and the behavioral organism. Each of these systems in turn has processes that work to fulfill four functional demands: pattern-maintenance, integration, goal-attainment, adaptation. While each of these functional demands has to be satisfied, one or another of them will be primary in importance because of tha particular set of values that governs the system.

According to Parsons the dominant value in American society is that of instrumental activism. Under this value, the society is not considered to be an end in itself, as would be the case under a totalitarian ideology, but rather as an instrumentality to ends that are in some way outside of it. The value orientation is activistic because "in the relation between the society

and its environments, what is valued is not passive adjustment to the exigencies of the environment but increasing the sphere of freedom of action within the environment and ultimately control over the environment." (Parsons and Platt, p. 41) This activistic component exerts normative pressure toward viewing the society as a goal-oriented system. Though the specification of these goals is a matter for debate, that there should be goals is largely unquestioned.

Under the value of instrumental activism, the functional imperative of adaptation receives the greatest attention. The adaptive function provides the disposable resources which enable goals to be effectively achieved. Assembling such resources is important if goals, whatever they may be, are to be achieved. Within the social system this leads to an emphasis on economic processes since these make products available to assist individuals in the pursuit of goals. Within the cultural system, the generation of knowledge becomes a central concern because knowledge is the primary adaptive resource for action in general. And at the level of the individual person, competence, i.e. the capacity for effective performance, becomes a needed attribute for full participation in adult life.

The value of instrumental activism makes the adaptive function important in general, but the contributions that institutions of higher education make to the performance of this function are especially important. The reason for this is that knowledge is the basis for both rational activity in the economy and competence in the individual, and each of these is a significant adaptive resource. Economic activity is productive and profitable to the degree that it is rational and the competence of individuals is increased by the knowledge they acquire. This focuses attention on the problem of generating new knowledge:

"Concern with adaptative function creates a built-in interest in knowledge, in the validity of what purports to be knowledge, in the cognitive

significance of items composing it, and in its generality and boundaries of relevance." (Parson and Platt, p. 67) Under these circumstances institutions of higher education take on great cultural significance because within them more than in any other institution knowledge is elaborated, certified, and transmitted to individuals and society.

This general interest in knowledge does not in itself explain the growth of vocationalism in higher education. Parsons does not even argue that the prominence of higher education in our society is due to the economic pay-off of advanced knowledge. Rather the case that he and Platt make is that "the same value system that favored economic development also favored cognitive development." (p. 45) But given this general interest in congnitive development, what accounts for an emphasis on a particular type of study? After all, humanistic studies have a cognitive basis just as do the applied sciences. What explains the shift in interest from the humanities to cognitive pursuits that are directly related to occupational performance?

An answer to this question can be detected in several observations made by Parsons and Platt. First, even though initially economic pay-off did not account for the support of higher education, as that pay-off became apparent it served to specify the general interest in cognitive matters to those that directly bore upon economic rationality. (p. 45) Secondly, the general normative pressure towards increased rationality of action was more easily satisfied in the economic realm than elsewhere: "Relatively high levels of rationality were attainable in the economic field especially because, unlike politics, production dealt with problems of the management of physical objects rather than with human relations." (p. 44) Finally, the upgrading of individual competence, especially in the practice of the professions, depends on cognitive

development. But as professional practice becomes more closely related to the basic intellectual disciplines, the interest in knowledge shifts its center of gravity. Those cognitive resources that can be mobilized for the attainment of practical goals are sought after. The demand for particular competencies determines what knowledge is to be considered important, and this is reflected in the types of academic programs pursued by undergraduates. (pp. 226-229).

According to this version of functionalism the growth of higher education is not to be explained by the economic benefits that come from knowledge. And yet this theory explains the growing interest in occupationally relevant knowledge by the increased professionalization of occupational roles. If these are not to be contradictory statements they must be harmonized by explaining the role of higher education in creating its own market for knowledge and then adjusting to meet the demands of that market. For this task legitimation theory seems more apt than functionalism.

Legitimation Theory

The basic claim of legitimation theory is that the schools alter the social structure itself. Neither status-competition theory nor functionalism would deny this, but these two theories fail to explore the full extent to which schools determine the rules by which people in society operate. Status-competition theory posits a social game in which the ante for continued participation is continually raised. Legitimation theory accepts that, but suggests that the rules of the game can be changed so that the old ways of winning no longer work. Functionalism states that the extensive development of education is a response to the basic functional orientation of society. Legitimation theory accepts that and then notes how the functional needs of society are in turn altered by a highly developed apparatus for producing knowledge.

Legitimation theory makes two fundamental claims. (Meyer, 1977) First, educational institutions determine that certain types of knowledge exist and furthermore that these types of knowledge are authoritative. Second, education defines certain categories of persons as possessing these bodies of knowledge and thereby the authority that comes from knowledge. Hence according to legitimation theory education operates both as a theory of knowledge by defining what currently counts as knowledge and as a theory of personnel by designating the persons who have knowledge and authority. In each of these ways educational institutions impinge on the very structure of society.

First, operating as a theory of knowledge, education actually expands the sources of cultural authority and in so doing creates new sets of specialized social positions. As the subject matter that qualifies for scholarly work grows, so does the possibility for rational action. What once was mysterious or governed by tradition and common sense becomes the arena for scholarly inquiry. When that happens only the person whose expertise is shaped by that scholarship can be said to act responsibly. Social problems must be dealt with by human-relations professionals. Industrial and environmental engineers replace the tinkerer in manufacturing processes. The econometrician sets new standards for business decisions. Whether or not these experts actually improve matters is not the question. Rather, the knowledge they possess is seen to be authoritative and must be employed at the risk of the action being judged negligent or irrational. By developing these categories of knowledge the educational system, especially at the level of higher education, in effect states the conditions for responsible action.

The second effect of education on social structure is that educational

institutions designate the persons who are qualified to act as experts. For example, institutions of higher education not only develop economic knowledge, but they also create the role of economist. These institutions justify the authority claimed by the economist in society and they also define who in fact is an economist. Thus alongside of the categories of knowledge created by educational institutions stand the corresponding roles in which the knowledge is authoritatively exercised. New knowledge makes possible new expertise and new expertise expands the realm of professional practice. In this way educational institutions are in a position to create new professions.

Legitimation theory seems tailor-made as an explanation for the growth of vocationalism in higher education. At one time, perhaps, the content of ones education was not as significant as the level of credential one possessed, since the skills necessary in occupational performance could be learned on the job. But after the area of professional competence has been expanded, the specific knowledge that one acquires in higher education becomes a significant factor in the expectations of society.

In a way legitimation theory points to an evolution in the social contribution of American higher education. Perhaps at one time the primary effect of higher education was to socialize students into the appropriate set of values which would allow them to be accepted into positions of elite status. The performance demands of those occupations were not such that the skills they required needed a sophisticated cognitive basis. Hence the social gate-keepers only had to notice the credential possessed by an applicant for an occupation. But as higher education developed and applied the canons of scholarly inquiry to an increasing array of topics, the knowledge relevant to rational action expanded and the standards for

competence in various areas were raised. Socialization into the proper values and beliefs was no longer sufficient. Cognitively based skills were now needed for adequate performance, where the standards for adequacy were themselves rooted in the academic world. The patina of high culture once associated with a college degree would then no longer be sufficient for occupational entry and the specific content of a college degree would become a relevant consideration for employment. Specific cognitively based skills have long been necessary for entry into the medical professions and to an extent the legal profession. Past research on the effect of higher education on occupational performance exempted these two fields from the conclusion that higher education did not provide specific occupational skills. But the exception has now become the rule, even at the level of undergraduate education, as the realm of professional competence in modern society has expanded far beyond the medical and legal professions. In effect, higher education has expanded the market for its own services.

Conclusion

Heraclitus was the Greek philosopher who said that to step in the same stream twice was impossible. Likewise higher education is an institution in movement and descriptions of it become dated as the institution evolves. If indeed a growth of vocationalism occurredin higher education during the 70's, then the description of higher education's social contribution may have to be recast. Status competition theory may have been accurate in describing a previous era of higher education when socialization effects overshadowed in importance the acquisition of specific occupational competencies. But if legitimation theory is correct, higher education alters the structure of society and thereby changes the contribution it makes to society. By

elaborating new areas of competence and by justifying the authority that comes from the possession of knowledge, higher education has transformed the way in which it affects the allocation of occupational roles. The growth of vocationalism in the 70's may signal such a change and thus call for a new description of the role higher education plays in determining an individual's occupational future.

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Table 1. -- Bachelor's degrees conferred by institutions of higher education, by field of study: United States, 1970-71, 1976-77.

Major field of study	1970-71	1976-77	Percent Change
Agriculture and natural resources	12,672	21,467	69.4
Architecture and environmental design	5,570	9,222	65.6
Area studies	2,492	2,953	18.5
Biological sciences	35,743	53,605	50.0
Business and management	115,527	152,088	31.6
Communications	10,802	23,214	114.9
Computer and information sciences	2,388	6,407	168.3
Education	176,571	143,658	-18.6
Engineering	50,046	49,283	- 1.5
Fine and applied arts	30,394	41,793	37.5
Foreign languages	19,945	13,944	-30.1
Health professions	25,226	57,328	127.3
Home economics	11,167	17,439	56.2
Law	545	559	2.6
Letters	73,122	47,071	-35.6
Library science	1,013	781	-22.9
Mathematics	24,801	14,196	-42.8
Military sciences	357	933	161.3
Physical sciences	21,412	22,497	5.1
Psychology	37,880	47,373	25.1
Public affairs and services	9,220	36,341	294.2

(Table 1, cont'd)

Social sciences	155,326	117,376	-24.4
Theology	3,744	6,109	63.2
Interdisciplinary studies	13,767	33,912	146.3
All fields	839,730	919,549	9.5

SOURCE: U.S. Deparment of Health, Education, and Welfare, National Center for Educational Statistics, Earned Degrees Conferred: 1970-71; Earned Degrees Conferred: 1976-77.

Table 2. -- Bachelor's degrees conferred by institutions of higher education in Fine and Applied Arts: United States, 1970-71, 1976-77.

Area of study	1970-71	1976-77	Percent Change
Fine arts, general	3,595	4,888	36.0
Art	10,688	14,257	33.4
Art history and appreciation	1,709	2,072	21.2
Music (performing, composition, theory)	3,318	5,384	62.3
Music (liberal arts program)	2,648	3,539	33.6
Music history and appreciation	96	235	144.8
Dramatic arts	3,675	5,234	42.4
Dance	297	801	169.7
Applied design	2,048	3,558	73.7
Cinematography	70	513	632.9
Photography	477	930	95.0
Other	1,773	382	-78.5

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, National Center for Educational Statistics, Earned Degrees Conferred: 1970-71, Earned Degrees Conferred: 1976-77.

Table 3. -- Bachelor's degrees conferred by institutions of higher education by selected areas in humanities: United States, 1970-71, 1976-77.

Area of study	1970-71	1976-77	Percent Change
English, general	51,562	28,790	-44.2
Literature, English	4,541	1,985	-56.3
History	44,663	25,433	-43.1
Philosophy	5,785	4,441	-23.2

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, National Center for Educational Statistics, Earned Degrees Conferred: 1970-71; Earned Degrees Conferred: 1976-77.